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THE CROW SUN DANCE.

BY ROBERT H. LOWIE.

THE Crow Sun Dance was not an annual ceremony, but was celebrated at irregular intervals in order to carry out a vow. This vow was made only by a man who, in the extremity of his grief over a relative's death at the hands of an enemy, wished to wreak vengeance on the offending tribe by undergoing the most painful but most effective mode of mourning. Whenever a Crow contemplated a move against the enemy, he sought to obtain a supernatural revelation showing where and under what circumstances the enemy would be overcome. In the Sun Dance this vision was sought through a distinctive agency, — a sacred doll, such as was owned by a few of the shamans in the tribe. One of these shamans was hired to supply his doll, to instruct the mourner, and to direct the entire ceremony in his pupil's behalf. This medicine-man stood approximately in the same relation to the mourner as a man owning a war-medicine to one who owned none and was obliged to hire the owner's, together with requisite instructions as to its use. As soon as the pledger of the Sun Dance saw the desired vision, the ceremony immediately came to a stop. In one particular case, frequently referred to by my informants, it was stopped even before a vision was seen, because an enemy had been found sneaking into the camp, and had been slain on the spot. The end sought in the Sun Dance having thus been attained, further procedure was regarded as unnecessary. Generally speaking, we might define the Crow Sun Dance as a form of mourning that sought to compass the death of an enemy in retaliation for the death of a kinsman through a vision induced by a specific sacred object.

The first question that thrusts itself on the attention of the student of Plains Indian ethnology is, Why should such an irregularly recurring mourning procedure be called by the same name as, say, the Cheyenne Sun Dance, which is pledged to preserve the devotee or his family from sickness? To one acquainted with the Cheyenne data, the answer is obvious when he glances at the chapter-headings of a description of the Crow ceremonial. Though the purpose for which the Crow ceremony is held differs absolutely from that of the Cheyenne ceremony, there is, in part, exactly the same ceremonial mode of procedure. Both tribes have a several days' preliminary performance in a preparatory lodge; both send out expeditions to select a tree for the centre pole of the Sun Dance Lodge; in both cases the tree is treated as though it were an enemy; and so forth. If we compared the Crow with the

Blackfoot, we should get some additional parallels, such as the prominence of a virtuous woman in the ceremony, and the collection of buffalo-tongues before the beginning of the ceremony proper. And among the Kiowa we should even find duplicated our Crow medicine-doll. In other words, we call the Crow ceremony "Sun Dance" because, while the *theory* of its performance is quite different from that of other Sun Dances, the performance itself is in several features the exact counterpart of the Sun Dance as found elsewhere.

It is not my object to deal at present with the historical problem, fascinating though it is, as to what tribes share which elements of the Crow complex, but to call attention to another matter. It follows, from what I have said, that the Crow Sun Dance is not a simple integral phenomenon, but is the product of secondary association. What I should like to lay stress on, however, is not merely the complex character of the ceremony, but certain psychological concomitants of the complexity. Corresponding to the cleavage into the objective phase of the performance and the avowed object of the performance, there is a difference in psychological attitude toward the ceremony, that corresponds to the difference between the esoteric and the exoteric attitude which Professor Boas has frequently emphasized. The Sun Dance of the Crow is especially suggestive on this point, because practically the entire tribe participated: hence the performers themselves were divided into an esoteric group, composed of the mourner and his shamanistic instructor, and an exoteric group, including every one else. But this did not by any means exhaust the differences in point of view that occurred among the participants. We have, in the first place, a number of men who voluntarily fasted with the mourner, and in addition tortured themselves, for the purpose of getting a vision. The activity of these persons was genuinely religious, like that of the mourner himself, but in no way identical with it in purpose. The volunteers did not seek visions that were to duplicate the mourner's, but sought an individual revelation such as, on other occasions, they might have sought in solitude. Then we have the activity of famous warriors for whom the occasion was a splendid advertisement. They enacted or recited their exploits, received public recognition for their bravery through special duties that fell on their shoulders, and had special privileges thrust upon them. Two chaste women and one chaste man were also rendered conspicuous by special duties of an honorable nature that were imposed upon them. Finally, to mention only the most important features, there were the undistinguished members of the community, of either sex, for whom the entire proceedings were an occasion of boundless jollity and licensed philandering, in part a dramatic performance of war-exploits past or future, and altogether a spectacle on the grandest scale within tribal comprehension.

Between these various activities and between the underlying psychological attitudes, there is no logical connection; they certainly in no way promote the ostensible object of the ceremony. Shall they, therefore, as might be assumed by some, be regarded as unessential or intrusive? To do so would be, in my opinion, to misconceive the very essence of ceremonial life. Ceremony for ceremony's sake is, I think, the secret of ceremonial activity; hence the vagueness, if not total absence, of any intelligible purpose for much ceremonial activity; hence the stability of many objective features in the absence of any stable subjective associations with those features. Why need a Cheyenne bother about the absence of logical connection between a dramatic onslaught on a tree and the cure of a sick relative, if all he wants is a show? It is as immaterial to him as is, for an election-eve celebrator, the connection of confetti-throwing, or tooting of a horn, with the greatest happiness of the greatest number. That there is a religious tinge in much of the Sun Dance procedure, it would be vain to deny; but perhaps it exists only in the same sense in which there is a religious atmosphere about nearly all of Indian life. The point I make is, that, as a tribal performance, the Sun Dance is not *essentially* a religious performance, but a free show. All the religious ends sought could, on Crow principles, be sought without any elaboration, in the solitude of a several days' fast on a mountain-top. The elaboration, nevertheless, exists; hence it must have an additional psychological background. That psychological background is, it seems to me, similar to that of the Roman festivals and *circenses*, and different from the psychology of the familiar lonely vigil. And the question I should like to bring up for discussion is the following: Is this not equally true of other great ceremonies, such as the Midewiwin, the Snake Dance, the secret societies of the Northwest Coast? Is not the alleged object of these performances a rationalistic mystification? Perhaps their distinctive features are correctly characterized by Swan in his account of Northwest Coast festivals: "It will be seen that the public part of these performances are rather in the nature of amusements akin to our theatrical pantomimes than of religious observances, though they are religiously observed."¹

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¹ Quoted in Boas, "The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians" (Report of the United States National Museum, 1895), p. 644.